The future of state education: how everything you value is disappearing
ATL is the union for education professionals across the UK. Active in the maintained, independent and post-16 sectors, we use our members’ experiences to influence education policy.

We also work with government and employers to secure fair pay and working conditions. From early years to HE, teachers to support staff, lecturers to leaders, we support and represent our members throughout their career.
Introduction

It is clear that education is one of the coalition government’s priorities for England. Indeed, it is the prerogative of all governments to update and modify a country’s education system. However, the cumulative effect of proposals heralded by recent legislation represents profound change on a grand scale. Make no mistake: if these changes are implemented by the end of this parliamentary term, the state education system as we know it will have disappeared forever.

One of many significant losses will be the disappearance of initial teacher training in universities. Without adequate funding to run teacher training courses – and with students so heavily in debt from tuition fees they are reluctant to pursue a career without the promise of high wages – universities will close their courses. Instead teachers will be trained on the job. While hands-on experience is vital in any professional development, the lack of a mix of theory, peer instruction and support means teacher training will be reduced to a toolbox of techniques overseen by mentors who are already over-stretched by their own workload. And pupils will be taught by inadequately trained staff.

The advent of academies and free schools will lead to the disappearance of the role of local authorities. Where once school leaders focused on education while local authorities provided support such as HR, payroll and advisory services, increasingly leaders will have to operate as business managers or use state funds to employ a manager. And they will have to invite in private sponsors and suppliers, whose main driver will be to make a profit out of running the school’s services.

Of course, schools that are run as small businesses would feel weighed down financially by national pay and conditions so they will be free to set their own. Academies and free schools already are. Teachers will operate on a transfer system between schools and will have to negotiate their own contract with each individual school. As a consequence schools in rich areas with wealthy sponsors will be able to offer higher salaries to teachers; schools in deprived areas or rural locations will gradually be run down. And if sponsors go bust, the taxpayer will have to pick up the tab.

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Amidst the day to day challenges of running the school’s finances, the annual funding for academies and free schools will depend on their ‘success’ against government-defined criteria – inevitably meaning an even more high stakes assessment and league table system. With success being linked to results, and results generally being achieved by pupils from higher socio-economic backgrounds, schools will find selection, overt or otherwise, hard to resist. The consequences will, once again, fall on a swathe of young people.

While each school will, in theory, be able to set their own curriculum, the Secretary of State is already pushing schools to focus on ‘traditional’ academic subjects with the English Baccalaureate. Those pupils who struggle with rote learning in these subjects will be cut adrift into what will become second-class vocational education.

All of these changes are set in motion against a backdrop of huge funding cuts: the cancellation of Building Schools for the Future projects; the pulling of education maintenance allowances; cuts to bursaries, early intervention grants and local authority education services; the devastation of higher education teaching grants to be subsidised by the hike in tuition fees. And the introduction of a pupil premium which, despite government promises, we now know adds no new money to the system.

This publication explores these proposals in more detail. It explains why teachers, other education staff and – most important of all – pupils will be the biggest losers. Just like the NHS, where new proposals suggest GPs take over commissioning services on a free market basis, education will be privatised. Education staff may have become accustomed to tolerating the latest education initiative while getting on with the business of teaching. But not this time.

This is not tinkering around the edges; if these changes are allowed to go through, there is no way back.
Teacher training and teaching practice

The coalition government has made clear that it considers raising the quality of teaching and teachers to be central to its school improvement policies. Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, told delegates at the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services June 2010 conference:

*Teaching is a craft and it is best learnt as an apprentice observing a master craftsman or woman. Watching others, and being rigorously observed yourself as you develop, is the best route to acquiring mastery in the classroom.*

As a consequence of this belief that teaching is mainly practical and schools are the best place to train teachers, Gove’s proposals to transform teacher training are based on the expansion of the Teach First model and the development of teaching schools.

In the Teach First model, students are chosen for a combination of good first degree and strong performance in a range of entry tests. Teach First offers six weeks’ university-led training, before placing students to teach in carefully chosen schools in disadvantaged areas. They are given support, mentoring and access to Teach First networks during the year, and successful students can gain QTS and a PGCE after a year in school.

Once qualified, Teach First students are supported with further training based on leadership development and organisational theory. In July 2010 the government gave a £4 million start-up grant to Teach First, to enable it to expand into every region in England, and into the primary sector for the first time. The extra £4 million will help to double the number of participants from 560 in 2010 to 1140 in 2012/13. The Teach First model assumes that many of these students will remain in schools for a few years, before moving into leadership positions within or outside education.

These may well be with companies that are moving into the education marketplace as academy sponsors or with goods to sell to schools. Only about 50 per cent of Teach First trainees remain in school beyond the compulsory two years, making this a high investment, low return way to train teachers.

Alongside this is the development of teaching schools, inspired by the model of teaching hospitals, according to the White Paper. The intention is to have at least 500 of these by the end of this parliamentary term, chosen from schools with outstanding Ofsted judgements, excellent and/or improving test and exam results, and leadership with the commitment to work in partnership to train new teachers. Teaching schools will take responsibility for initial teacher training (ITT), continuing professional development (CPD) and leadership development, as well as working with schools in challenging circumstances and developing networks of schools. There is little detail of how these will work yet. Initial proposals suggest that new students may start their ITT in school, and the school would be responsible for both their practical and theoretical education.

Although the possibility remains that universities may play a part in ITT, a reduction in the universities teaching grant of 80 per cent and its replacement with tuition fees risks an increased number of higher education institutions failing when fewer young people choose to go to university. **Less money means a limit on the range of courses available and the extent of support for students.**

The possibility of tuition fees of £9,000 a year, and the real rate of interest attached, may well put off large numbers of students from applying to university at all, or point them towards degree subjects that lead more obviously into well-paid jobs. Graduates will have to pay off their loans while also trying to buy a house and pay into a pension fund – all of which will be difficult on a teacher’s salary. Taken alongside public sector pay freezes and pension cuts, teacher shortages become a real threat.
This is particularly the case for shortage subjects. According to a report from the University of Buckingham, in 2008/9 15 per cent of students training to teach IT, 17 per cent training to teach chemistry, 21 per cent of maths trainees and over 25 per cent of students training to teach physics in secondary schools failed to get at least a 2:2 from a British university. The market solution to university funding may lead to a more limited range of subjects available for undergraduates and potentially limits the range of subjects which teachers will bring into schools. As a consequence, more lessons will be taught by non-specialists.

And of course, valuing degree classification above all else in terms of selection for teacher training ignores the fact that **academic success does not mean a person will be any good at teaching children.** It takes many other qualities – the ability to communicate, to inspire and enthuse young people, a good imagination, empathy and patience. It would also be foolish to discourage people with solid industry and business experience from going into teaching for the want of a top degree.

A number of outcomes are also immediately predictable as a result of ‘in-school’ training once students have made it into ITT. Firstly, to divorce education theory from practical training runs a serious risk of impoverishing teaching, with the consequent impact on pupil’s learning. Trainee teachers can be given a range of techniques to follow, whether in teaching reading or in managing behaviour or in motivating pupils within their chosen subject. But they can only gain limited experience from their own practice.

Learning theory allows student teachers to understand why they use a particular technique, why that should work and why it might not. Studying the pedagogical aspects of their subject allows them to understand the concepts involved and to gain a range of ways in which those concepts can be learnt, and therefore taught. And understanding about assessment allows them to develop their own ways of assessing pupils and improve their own practice.

Without good theoretical knowledge, student teachers will have little to fall back on when the techniques they have learnt do not work with particular pupils or classes.

There are also wider ramifications for teaching practice. For higher education institutions, a loss of focus in the initial training of teachers, combined with huge funding cuts, will lead to job losses. This is likely to lead to less independent research into the practice and theory of teaching, with a long-term impact on the depth and breadth of evidence and innovation. Instead ‘best practice’ will be determined in other ways. The Secretary of State has already taken ownership of teachers’ Induction Standards and is developing new standards for qualified teacher status. And he has ignored any evidence that suggests reading is best taught using a mixture of methods in favour of saying synthetic phonics has to be the prescribed method. So this government already believes it knows best about teaching practices.

Additionally, private companies involved in education through academy sponsorship and elsewhere will not be slow in bringing out support for schools in managing behaviour or assessment practices based on their interpretation of pedagogy and practice. Already there are plans to move programmes developed by government agencies, such as ‘Every child a reader’ and ‘Every child a writer’, onto the open market. And Edexcel, a Pearson company, is advertising a full curriculum development service to schools that are ‘bewildered’ by the pace of change. Teachers will not lead their own profession.

The other immediate impact of proposed changes to teacher training is on the schools, teachers and leaders themselves. Student teachers need supervision, support, training and mentoring. Teachers currently in the classroom have a job to do – teaching pupils. As funding is cut, support staff are made redundant, planning, preparation and assessment time disappears and schools expect longer working hours, where are the staff who will train, support and mentor student teachers?
We know from current student members that these things can already be hit and miss within their induction years. This can only get worse under these proposals. And if student teachers are left to fend for themselves, they could leave the profession before they have even begun.

And where is the training for mentors and tutors? Expert teachers do not just have more teaching tools in the toolbox. They rely on their experience to teach instinctively. While they will be inspirational to watch, they may not be the best people to explain to trainees how they do what they do, nor are they necessarily the right people to mentor or observe trainees and provide feedback.

The cumulative impact of these changes is potentially huge. By the end of this parliamentary term, pupils may be taught by untrained and unsupported teachers. Their current teachers will be under pressure to give time to student teachers alongside pupils. And those students who do manage to complete a course and qualify as teachers may be able to teach particular groups of pupils, or particular aspects of subjects, but are limited to officially prescribed ‘best practice’ and do not have the theory to underpin reflective and continually developing practice. As the craft-based model of teaching becomes the norm, these new-style teachers will be fast-tracked into leadership positions.

Leadership

Under the coalition government, school leaders will be given “more power and control. Not just to drive improvement in their own schools – but to drive improvement across our whole education system.” Schools will have the freedom to “develop their own curriculum and fully control their own budget and staffing” (National College conference speech, June 2010).

The aim is to double the numbers of national and local leaders of education, and to develop specialist leaders of education in posts such as deputies, business managers and middle leaders.

According to the National College, teaching schools, led by national leaders of education, are expected to offer leadership development, and to identify potential leaders from the start of teachers’ careers. The National College, which is responsible along with the Training and Development Agency for the development of teaching schools, is also developing a range of leadership programmes including two accelerated ones. ‘Tomorrow’s heads’ is for teachers, former teachers and non-teaching professionals who are looking for a headship in primary, special or secondary schools. ‘Future leaders’ is aimed at current or former teachers who wish to lead a challenging secondary school. According to their website, Teach First also aims to develop participants’ leadership abilities.

There are some interesting partnerships and alliances involved in these training initiatives. ‘Future leaders’, for example, is supported by the National College as well as ARK and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. Jo Owen, one of the founders of Teach First, and Brett Wigdortz, Teach First CEO, both sit on the ‘Future leaders’ board. One of the middle leader training courses, ‘Teaching leaders’, is also developed in partnership between the National College, ARK and Teach First. ARK is of course a prominent academy sponsor, and recruits Teach First graduates for its academies. ARK’s board is made up of hedge fund managers, including major donors to both the Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties. Paul Marshall, a co-founder of ARK, is a special advisor to Nick Clegg and is also an advisor to the New Schools Network, which was set up and funded to give advice to a range of potential school providers. All this points to the exponential growth of links between business, politics and education.

This is further evidenced by the fact that the coalition has asked the National College to revise the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH), to learn from MBA and Masters in Public Administration courses, and to enable a range of providers to offer new qualifications, according to the White Paper.
Already, schools are spoken of as businesses, and now leaders will be business leaders too. The problem with this is that businesses operate on a profit and loss basis, can increase and decrease quality in relation to cost, and can do the same with price. Schools on the other hand need to do the best by every child. Children will arrive with very different prior experiences and will need different levels of support to ensure they can leave with the very highest quality of education. Good teaching cannot be bought on the cheap.

Under this government, the leadership role is already fast expanding as schools become autonomous under the academies programme (see ‘Academies and free schools’ on page 11), cut free from local authority support. Leaders are becoming responsible for buildings, staffing, contracts, budgets and, increasingly, other schools too. In the future, schools will be led by those who have been through inschool, practice-based training, based on government or private-sponsored pedagogy. These leaders will have been fast-tracked. Little of their time will have been spent in the classroom – some will not have qualified teacher status (QTS) at all.

And so the leaders of our education system will have little in-depth experience of teaching in different circumstances, and little knowledge of children’s development and learning. Their leadership training will have emphasised business models of leadership. They will be school managers, brought in to manage the performance of teachers and pupils alike. They will network with each other through teacher and leadership training. They are also, potentially, the future Ministers of Education and chairs of Ofsted, Ofqual and the New Schools Network. And where they cannot manage the expanded role, they will buy in support from private organisations to deal with staffing, finance and building management.

**ATL believes a school leader’s first responsibility should be for pupil learning and the quality of teaching. The clue is in the title that looks set to disappear: ‘head teacher’.**

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**Curriculum and qualifications**

The Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency currently manages both curriculum and assessment at arms’ length from government. Under new legislation, both will now be under the control of the Secretary of State for Education. Gove’s review of the national curriculum begins with English, mathematics, science and physical education, to be in schools by September 2012. Although he has commissioned an independent review of primary school assessment, Gove is already developing a national test of phonic decoding for six year olds, and has specified that national tests (improved and refined) are here to stay.

Ofqual is charged with ensuring that qualifications and exams in England match the best international qualifications. The English Baccalaureate – introduced retrospectively in 2010 to allow government to report how many pupils attain GCSEs (A*-C) in English, mathematics, two sciences, a humanity (history or geography) and a foreign language (ancient or modern) – is already causing secondary schools to change their curriculum. And an independent review of vocational education has recommended that academic subjects should take up the bulk of the curriculum at key stage 4, with vocational specialisation confined to 20 per cent of a pupil’s timetable. Already it is obvious that the coalition government sees some form of core academic curriculum and ‘all the rest’, even though most commentators (including Ofsted) argue that schools do best in the ‘core’ subjects when they take the whole curriculum seriously.

What teachers, parents and – ultimately – pupils value is a national curriculum model that starts with pupil needs and interests, and is designed around the skills and attitudes we want pupils to acquire and develop. Assessment is vital for effective teaching, and qualifications should empower pupils and lead to fulfilling lives. The existing national curriculum may not be perfect but government’s role is to ensure pupil entitlement, coherency and consistency, not to prescribe detail.
A proper review of the curriculum would begin with aims and purposes. Not only has this one begun with subjects, it will specify key pieces of knowledge that should be taught. At think tank Reform’s conference in November 2010, Schools Minister Nick Gibb set out his stall:

...education is about the transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next... The facts, dates and narrative of our history in fact join us all together ...So we will slim down the national curriculum to ensure that pupils have the knowledge they need at each stage of their education....

We find a clue as to the evidence on which he bases his curriculum policy in a speech to the think tank Politeia in November 2010. There he tells delegates:

I studied Latin at secondary school in the state sector, to O-level... I thoroughly enjoyed it. It equipped me for life. And it is for this reason that the decimation of the teaching of Latin in the state sector over the last few decades is so alarming.

The English Baccalaureate also shows us that schools and pupils will only be deemed successful if they cover limited academic subjects as specified by government. Gove wants the curriculum to be an international benchmark, to set out “the crucial concepts and ideas that each year group should learn” (foreword to Could do better, Cambridge Assessment, 2010). This might work for aspects of some subjects, for example number work may be neatly sequenced, with one concept or skill building on another. Decisions in other subjects are less obvious: there could be a multitude of opinions about the key concepts in ‘our island history’ or the key texts in literature. **It is difficult to see how government will ensure these are professional and not political decisions.**

To education staff it is obvious the curriculum is about much more than the subjects within it. Schools should be places where children learn to find their own place in the world; where they learn about responsibility and community. It is where they learn how to learn and how to motivate themselves and others.

According to Nick Gibb, however: “The other skills should also happen at school through extracurricular activity, through competitive sports, but that is a separate issue from the curriculum.” (New Statesman, July 2008)

Learning itself is not a simple process with a single beginning and a finishing line. Children’s learning is based on their previous experiences and the concepts they have developed. Good teachers learn about pupils’ individual world views, and use the curriculum to build and challenge and develop learning. A rigid curriculum of facts and figures lends itself to rote learning, which sits on top of prior experience and never changes or challenges individual learners. **Gove’s lists of kings and queens and rivers might be great for pub quizzes but it does little to support pupils with life beyond school.**

And what of those children who aren’t naturally gifted at remembering facts and figures? A curriculum based on knowledge and rote learning – where other subjects beyond the ‘core’ have been downgraded – turns these children off school. Teachers know this leads to disengagement, disaffection and disruptive behaviour. The risk is that these children will be put off learning for the rest of their lives.

Opportunities for good vocational learning might have been an answer to this. But in setting out their stall, Ministers have shown they wish to focus their attention on the structure of individual academic subjects, with vocational education left to fill the gaps. There has been little attempt to understand vocational content, pedagogy and assessment. Even with proposals such as Lord Kenneth Baker’s technical baccalaureate, which would include “German for business, the history of engineering, that kind of thing” and “bridging subjects” such as IT and starting a business (according to an interview with him in The Guardian), there is little professional input into developments and much political manoeuvring. At political level, vocational education will be a marginalised path for those who can’t make it in the mainstream curriculum.
It is worth pointing out that, despite dictation from the Secretary of State on curriculum for state schools, academies and free schools (which are also state-funded) appear to be at liberty to make up their own. This means they can develop their own curriculum entirely or diverge for some subjects; for example, they may choose to focus RE entirely on one religion, or may plan to teach intelligent design/creationism in science. Academy sponsors will also develop curriculum materials and may sell them to other schools as well as imposing them on their own.

Gove has repeatedly stated that he wants to give teachers more control over what they teach. And yet his review panel for the curriculum, though it included educationalists, did not include any practising teachers, suggesting there will be little opportunity to question or debate the decisions, and little professional input about what children should learn or how.

Teachers and parents have been expressing concern for years about a straitjacketed curriculum, in which there is little opportunity for creativity and innovation in teaching, or flexibility and excitement in learning. These proposals – and those around assessment (see ‘Assessment’ in the next column) – guarantee this loss of opportunity. And the real losers are the pupils.

**Within this parliamentary term, we are in danger of creating a lost generation – students with parents who either don’t or can’t support their education, who may be disengaged by a curriculum of facts and figures, who find limited and marginalised opportunities for vocational learning.** These are the same pupils who have had their education maintenance allowance cut and so may find it impossible to stay on in education even if they want to. And at the time of going to press, youth unemployment was reaching a record high.

### Assessment

The coalition government believes that accountability for student performance is critical to driving educational improvement. It plans to introduce or strengthen a range of accountability measures that will be used to show parents how well their children do; demonstrate to taxpayers how their money is spent; identify good practice in the best schools; and identify schools where students are being let down. Comparative data will allow comparison between schools to drive higher performance and better value for money.

To this end, government will publish “as much data as possible so parents and teachers can really see what is going on in schools”. (TES, 11 March 2011)

It is likely different kinds of league tables will be constructed from this data by all sorts of interested parties. League tables already include detailed spending figures and will soon include school-by-school breakdowns of the number of pupils getting certain grades in different GCSEs.

In many ways this sounds entirely reasonable. In fact, accountability is vital. Teachers and leaders should be accountable for the quality of their teaching, for pupil learning and for continual development and improvement of both. They should have to answer to parents, to the state and to the profession.

The trouble is that government proposals are based on test data, and assume the reliability of tests and associated assessments. On a national basis, it is argued that end of key stage assessment levels can be wrong between 16 and 30 per cent of the time (*Level best?*, ATL, 2008). As some will be below the real level a child achieves and some above, this evens itself out over a large cohort (ie the country as a whole). In a single class this could be devastating.

While tests have only been high stakes at school level, teachers have nevertheless felt under pressure to teach to the test, limiting the curriculum taught (further compounding the narrowing of the curriculum – see ‘Curriculum and qualifications’ on page 6) and ensuring a wealth of test practice.
How much worse might this become if testing spreads to all classes in a school because tests become high stakes at individual teacher level as a result of the introduction of performance-related pay (see ‘Pay and conditions’ in the next column)? Such proposals are also based on the assumption that parents wish to audit schools in this way and don’t share teachers’ concerns about the pressure certain tests put on their children. Yet end of key stage 2 SATs put enormous strain on pupils, particularly those who are working below ‘expected’ levels. Those are the children who believe they will ‘fail’ SATs and who consequently feel like learning failures, unwilling to risk any challenging learning experiences.

Finally, this assessment regime assumes that performance in exams and tests is the only measure of school success. Measuring schools and teachers based on pupil attainment in tests supposes that children progress at fixed rates and in measurable ways. But learning is not like that. Some children need to linger in particular concepts and gain multiple experiences before they can be said to understand enough to move on.

In addition, children’s home lives may be chaotic – they may be carers or have illnesses. They may be constantly on the move between houses, have behavioural problems, special needs, poor motivation or difficult attitudes to learning. They may have developed entrenched beliefs about their own capabilities, or about aspects of a subject, that will take a lot of patient teaching to change.

Good teaching is about assessing children’s needs, providing challenge that is meaningful to the child. Individual teachers make a difference. More lasting differences are made by teachers working together, and working with other professionals, to meet the range of needs that pupils present. Not by having to focus on getting them through the next test. A focus on test results leads to compliance and conformance, not in-depth pupil learning and development.

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**Pay and conditions of education staff**

The government has made clear that it intends to dismantle the framework of national pay and conditions for teachers. From Gove’s instruction to the body setting teachers’ pay that it must introduce greater freedoms and flexibilities, to Lord Hill’s letter to schools stating that if they apply nationally agreed pay and conditions they will not be able to convert to academy status, the government’s direction of travel is obvious. This is further reinforced by the abolition of the new body to set up a national pay framework for support staff.

A national pay and conditions structure ensures there is a level playing field for all schools to be able to attract the best teachers and that schools cannot undercut each other. Making the school workforce subject to market forces means that schools will have to compete for staff on price grounds. Those schools with more money will be able to attract better teachers – better teachers could lead to better results, meaning parents fight to send their children to these schools, leaving other schools to sink.

The disappearance of national pay and conditions would make it much more difficult for teachers to move between schools and around the country. It would enable schools, particularly in areas where jobs are scarce, to offer low wages on the assumption that teachers will take any job rather than no job at all. Higher pay will go to those with the confidence to demand it, which often leads to inequity based on gender and ethnicity. And whether pay is negotiated at individual level or at school level, this will take a huge amount of professional time for both teachers and school leaders.

School support staff are amongst the lowest paid in the public sector. Nevertheless, one of the first moves of the government was to announce the abolition of the School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB), which had been
set up by the previous government to establish a framework of national roles and salaries. Without the SSSNB, school support staff, mainly women and part-time time workers, will continue to be poorly paid for a responsible and essential role.

As well as pay, working conditions are important for teachers and elements such as long hours will have a knock-on effect on children. But Michael Gove wants school days to run from 7.30am to 5.30pm. He also wants sites to open on Saturdays and to increase terms by two weeks, to a total of 40 weeks a year. University technical colleges will, according to Kenneth Baker, insist on 40-80 days’ work experience a year, and student attendance 9 hours a day, 40 weeks a year. While it may be true that some pupils would benefit from additional time in school, it may not be the correct solution for all. For pupils disaffected by school it might equally be true that extra hours will make the situation worse. There is also a limit to how much learning a child can be expected to absorb, and Ministers have not offered any evidence to show that keeping schools open all hours as if they were supermarkets will improve standards.

In addition, teachers work on average 50 hours a week and are already stressed and exhausted from carrying out their existing responsibilities. Adding to this will not make them any more effective in the classroom. Teachers are educators not babysitters.

Teachers are professionals in the same way as doctors and midwives. They are not bankers and there is no evidence that paying them bonuses will make them more effective. Nevertheless, bonuses and performance-related pay are a possible outcome given this government’s direction of travel.

Currently, much of teacher performance is measured by pupil attainment, through national tests and exams or through internal assessments based on levels of progress, but measuring pupil attainment is extremely problematic (see ‘Assessment’ on page 8). While it may be an indicator of pupil progress, it is not a sound basis for a pay structure.

There is also unlikely to be enough money available for schools to reward every single teacher, even if all show evidence of ‘success’. This kind of system may lead teachers to compete rather than collaborate, although collaboration is more likely to improve teaching. Innovation and creativity in teaching will be too risky, as will teaching pupils with particular needs which make their progress slower, since they will not guarantee immediate success and may lead to loss of pay.

When the FE sector became independent from local authorities, we saw moves by colleges to reduce staffing costs by employing lecturers on a casual basis. Term-time only and short-term contracts to cover a course are now common in FE and undercut the professionalism of the workforce. A similar situation could be replicated in schools. As a consequence pupils would be disadvantaged by the constant turnover of staff, with each new staff member being unfamiliar with their individual needs.

In the past few years much has been achieved in freeing teachers from routine administrative functions such as photocopying. However, reductions in the number of support staff posts as a result of local government cuts will mean that, once again, teachers may have to spend their time doing the administration and photocopying instead of teaching pupils.

As if removing national pay and conditions was not damaging enough for those in work, the government is also making it harder for education staff to enjoy their retirement by substantially reducing their pension benefits. The Hutton report on pensions gives very clear messages that teachers’ final salary pension is a barrier to workers moving from the public to the private sector.
This will be music to the ears of government, as undermining the final salary pension will make it easier for private providers to take on public sector contracts.

Ultimately, the pension has always been an important recruitment tool in attracting high quality graduates into teaching. **This, taken alongside all the other potential changes to pay and conditions, will not encourage people to devote their careers to public service.**

### Academies and free schools

The biggest threat to the education structure is the fragmentation of schools into independent and isolated units, and being open to purchase by private sponsors. All maintained schools in England can now apply for academy status, and parents, charities, independent schools and other community groups can apply to set up a free school. Ultimately, it is the government’s intention that all state schools will become an academy of one sort or another, including university technical colleges, pupil referral units, special schools, primary, secondary and all-through schools. The state education system will no longer exist. In its place will be a collection of independently managed, privately sponsored and state-funded individual schools.

By opting out of local authority control, academies effectively opt out of accountability at local level to parents and the community, and opt in to central government control through a funding agreement. At the moment, local authorities are responsible for place-planning for pupils in their area and ensuring adherence to the admissions code. Once every school is its own admissions authority, who will ensure that everyone adheres to the code, and where will a parent go if there is no school place for their child?

Academies and free schools effectively work in competition with one another in a market system. They will succeed or fail on their ability to turn out ‘successful’ pupils, largely determined by success in the league tables (see ‘Assessment’ on page 8). Why would any competitive school want to educate children who are disadvantaged, troublesome or less able and would not show the school in a good light? We already know academies exclude more children. This could mean, for example, that children with special educational needs are disproportionately excluded. **Currently, if a student is excluded local authorities remain responsible for his or her education. In the new education landscape, where will these pupils go?**

Academy and free school status gives schools the freedom to set their own pay and conditions for staff and depart from the national curriculum. It also means schools break away from local authority support services. These include advisory services, SEN and disability support, behaviour support, child and adolescent health and social care services, emergency contingencies, training and professional development, payroll support, staff costs including covering for long-term absences or maternity leave, etc – all of which will have to be funded from within an academy’s own budget. Schools will have to manage this, potentially distracting school leaders from their central responsibility for their pupils’ education. Those setting up free schools will find they have to know as much about employment law and health and safety as they do about education.

The funding provided to new academies has seemed attractive to some but how much better off will these schools be when they have provided or out-sourced all of what were the local authority’s support functions? In addition, the

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“As an academy, I’m worried we will find ourselves in dire straits three years down the line when the money dries up and we’ve had to buy in services.”

**Teacher, Surrey**

www.atl.org.uk/speakoutforeducation
government’s review of funding arrangements, and an increase in the number of academies, is likely to mean that there will be little financial advantage to academy status in 2011 and none at all after 2012. A report by the cross-party Public Accounts Committee at the beginning of 2011 looking at the performance of existing sponsored academies found that “there are already signs of potential financial and governance instability, even at this early stage in the development of the academies programme.” The same report also found that “some existing sponsors had failed to fulfil the financial contributions they originally pledged to their academies.” Without local authority support, there is no safety net.

The reality is that schools will turn to private suppliers to provide these services. We already know that companies are contacting schools considering converting to academies, seeking to build chains of schools to which they can offer services with economies of scale. Chris Woodhead, a former Chief Inspector for Schools, has stated that the government’s free school targets cannot be reached without allowing the private sector in and allowing them to make a profit. In Sweden, one of the models for the free schools programme, private companies have been able to make a profit from the beginning, and the same companies are already making approaches to schools in England.

What is indisputable is that we will end up with an education system paid for by the taxpayer, privately administered and from which companies will rake any ‘surplus’ that should be spent on pupils.

Many of the free schools are being established by faith groups, which will further segregate the community and lead to pupils having to travel to find a school which accepts their beliefs or ethos. And as ‘successful’ schools compete for motivated pupils and supportive parents, those that are less able or willing will stay in schools that are neglected by government.

Fewer pupils will mean less money, fewer well-qualified staff and resources, until schools reach a tipping point where results are so low they are forced to close or are taken over by neighbouring academies. But schools are more than exam factories. Closing them down demoralises the pupils and teachers within them and leaves a hole in the local community.

In an open market, private companies may be encouraged to buy and sell schools to maximise profits. Once a company has a big enough chain of schools, its failure could bring down a large swathe of the school system. In small communities even one school sponsor failing could be disastrous. Government would not be able to let it fail. We’ve seen how this works with the banking system, with banks bailed out with taxpayers’ money and then allowed to continue as before with little accountability to those they serve.

Considering what a seismic change this represents to our education system, there is no compelling evidence that academies and free schools will raise standards. In 2009 a report by the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics found no evidence a school that is turned into an academy improves its exam results more than any other in its neighbourhood. Free schools are not even required to employ teachers that are qualified.

When you see the cumulative potential effect of all these changes, it is clear the coalition government is taking a huge and unacceptable gamble with our education system. Once set in train, the process is irreversible. And this can only be to the detriment of the majority of education staff, pupils and the communities in which we live.

Want to know what you can do about it?
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